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Konformity kills

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Unconventional Thinking. More crucial now than ever before.

According to **Dr. Eric J. Romero**, the fall of the great brands of the last millennium - Nokia, Kodak, Hewlett Packard and General Motors - are examples of how conventional thinking impedes innovation. Nowadays, it is unconventional leadership and thinking that spur competitive advantage. The importance of creativity has been emphasised in nearly all literature and journal articles published this decade, adds the author of *Compete Outside the Box: The Unconventional Way to Beat the Competition*. "The fact is, the lack of it has brought the corporate behemoths of yore to their knees, a situation that has irked and fascinated both business and academic circles."

What unconventional leadership looks like

Romero considers unconventional leaders as "defining the industry they are in" and at times even "defining how we live". Facebook, for example, has insinuated itself into our daily lives as well as our social psyche.

One of the great things about unconventional leaders, he told *Perspectives@SMU* after his talk at SMU's Wee Kim Wee Centre recently, is that the successful concepts they formulate and operate on, are able to work across all industries and areas of business, and can be learnt and emulated by others. "I abhor political correctness," says Romero, "so I say the things that everyone is thinking, but no one wants to talk about...the important stuff!"

Conformity and conventional thinking prevent the creation of new products, services and ventures that are better able to meet consumer needs, he explains, pointing to companies like Kodak, General Motors, Hewlett Packard, and a slew of Japanese companies from the late 1990s. All of them, he adds, lacked the competitive advantage when it came to innovation. "At best, they follow the industry leaders and earn an average profit."

Typically, conventional thinkers and organisations prefer safety and avoid risk, follow trends and have a negative perception of the weird, strange and odd. "Conventional thinking takes many forms," he explains. "These include an emphasis on bureaucracy, hierarchy, political correctness, useless meetings, and—the old favourites of many managers and administrators—professional attire and inflexible work schedules."

What's so bad about that, you may ask. "Well," responds Romero, "Conventional wisdom deludes you into thinking you have created certainty and have everything figured out. Therefore there's no need to think of better ways of doing things."

That's a big mistake, he adds, pointing to the famous statement by Ken Olson, president, chairman and founder of Digital Equipment Corp. who said in 1977, "There is no reason anyone would want a computer in their home."

"These days, winning requires innovation," avers Romero. "And this depends on unconventional leadership that is able to promote an unconventional culture based on creativity, flexibility and risk-taking, all of which are essential to innovation."

So how to identify an unconventional thinker?

Unconventional leaders do things others say is impossible, says Romero. They ignore conventional wisdom and find a better way and innovate. Innovation is always a game-changer, he adds. Well-known unconventional leaders include Vogue editor-in-chief Anna Wintour, Virgin CEO Richard Branson and Facebook's Mark Zuckerberg. He considers all of them as 'unleashing creativity and flexibility.'

A personal favourite of Romero's is CNN founder, Ted Turner, who created a 24-hour dedicated cable news network in 1980 at a time when the convention for watching national news was only during dinner hours. Adds Romero, "He knew little if anything about the news business, but he knew it was inconvenient to watch national news only at the dinner hour."

Romero is of the firm opinion that everyone is born a creative unconventional thinker but that conventional thinking is learned through socialisation at an early age.

"But," he stresses, "if it can be learned, it can be unlearned."

Innovation and humour

Romero believes humour is a social catalyst that helps people work better together. People at all levels of society and in all organisation types use humour. However, it does require an open mind, he adds.

Humour can transform a dull organisation where work is a burden, to one where people like coming to work and being together with co-workers. It's an important factor in organisations because of its positive effect on a variety of factors relevant to management such as group cohesiveness, communication, socialisation, leadership effectiveness, creativity, and stress reduction.

However, despite overwhelming evidence to support the important role that humour can play in organisations, many people dismiss it as irrelevant to the workplace. This is out-dated thinking, he adds. “The modern workplace is noticeably different than that of the past and humour is now an important element in the organisational culture of many successful companies, such as Southwest Airlines, Google, and Ben & Jerry’s. All of them are unconventional companies that have been able to beat the competition.”